MASK IN THE PLOTS OF FOUR BLACK WRITTEN COMEDIES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In the one-act comedy Happy Ending,[1] by Douglas Turner Ward, two maids, Vie and Ellie, are troubled, because their boss, Mr. Harrison, is about to divorce his unfaithful wife. The maids are disloyal because they had devised elaborate schemes for stealing their boss' food, clothing, furniture, and even airline tickets. Also, they attached many of their bills to Mr. Harrison's bills. However, the maids' would-be-radical, yet hypocritical nephew, Junie, attempts to reprimand his aunts for being overly concerned about their "white" boss' problems. In a bitter exchange, the aunts finally convince Junie of the importance of their persuading Mr. Harrison once again to forgive his wife for her infidelity. The three, along with Ellie's husband Arthur, then sit down to figure out a solution to Mr. Harrison's conflict with his wife. Fortunately, Mr. Harrison calls Ellie to let her know that he and his wife are once again on good terms. Thus, the maids will now be able to continue pilfering their boss. Junie will continue to reap the benefits--a "happy ending."

Ironically, the so called happy ending may not actually be happy. The characters fail to find alternative solutions to their consistent dependency upon Mr. Harrison for their needs and existence in this society. They eventually return to the same dependent relationship that existed prior to Mr. Harrison's problem. According to the traditional

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[1] Douglas Turner Ward, Happy Ending and Day of Absence (New York, 1966).

relationship between black playwrights and white critics and audiences, the latter would possibly be very willing to accept this type of interpretation. The maids' thievery is exaggerated and overstated beyond seriousness. Junie's anger is neutralized by his foot-in-his-mouth responses to his aunts who were major means of financial support as well as of food, clothing, and education.

However, underneath the aunts' portrayed acceptance of dependency upon Mr. Harrison, the overstated exaggeration of their thievery, and Junie's radical hypocrisy there is another meaning. The play can be interpreted as symbolic of two black ideologies, the aunts' and Junie's, in order to continue the struggle for freedom and equality in this society. Ellie and Vi eventually convince Junie of his role and responsibility, that is, to continue his pursuit of adequate employment and education, and the importance of their grooming him to do so.

In essence, the play Happy Ending displays the technique of mask. One should consider mask within the context of this study as a technique utilized by black writers in their works that portrays one meaning through overstatement or exaggeration of the plot, characters, language, or themes; yet disguised within those very elements is an underlying meaning. This meaning carries a serious message that is usually understated or implied. Happy Ending, a comedy written by a black writer, carries a light and amusing plot, yet the exaggerated and overstated concern of Ellie and Vi over the stability of Mr. Harrison's marriage, and their theft and pilfering of everything they could get their hands on have far more serious implications than may at first seem evident.

In this study, the writer will attempt to point out the masked nature of other comedies written by black playwrights. The purpose of pointing out mask in the selected comedies is to demonstrate that in an effort to survive, succeed or be recognized in American theater, black dramatists met the standards dictated to them by the theater establishment. That is, they presented negative themes, symbols, images, and portrayals of blacks usually through the medium of comedy. However, it was ironically through comedy that black playwrights intentionally or unintentionally succeeded in understating their mistreatment in American theater and society. The prevalence of mask in the plays to be discussed demonstrates this fact.

The plays[1] selected for the following discussion are St. Louis Woman, by Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen, with lyrics by Johnny Mercer and music by Harold Arlen (first presented at the Martin Beck Theater, New York City, March 30, 1946); Trouble in Mind, by Alice Childress (first presented at Greenwich Mews Theater, New York City, Nov. 4, 1955; Simply Heavenly, by Langston Hughes, with music by David Martin (first presented at the 85th Street Playhouse, New York City, May, 1957); and Purlie Victorious, by Ossie Davis (first presented at the Cort Theater, New York City, Sept. 28, 1961). The plays were selected mainly because they strangly demonstrate the prevalence of mask. In addition, conflicts of the protagonists are serious in nature. This is demonstrated in the types of conflicts the protagonists in each play encounter.

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[1] The plays are anthologized in Black Theater, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1971).

These plays developed in an atmosphere in which black dramatists were given unjust treatment. Thus, the writer feels it necessary at this point to demonstrate briefly the mistreatment of blacks in the theater. It is possibly this factor that was instrumental in black playwrights' presenting comedies with double-edged meanings.

There were two dominant trends in American theater that reflect the unjust treatment of black dramatists. First, traditional American theater refused to accept black dramatists as equal contributors to its tradition. Second, black dramatists were expected to project servile, docile, and happy-go-lucky images of the black man on the stage.

According to several critics and writers, a trend of black rejection by whites in the theater existed from the early stages of its development to the period of the plays we shall discuss. Leonard C. Archer states: "From the Colonial Period to the 1850's there were no Negroes on the New York stage or in the audience."[1] Darwin Turner elaborates on this trend of rejection in the following passage:

> While black performers struggled for roles, black writers experienced even greater difficulty attempting to stage their ideas before white audiences. A play by an Afro-American was produced in New York City as early as 1821...seventy-five years later, Broadway audiences enjoyed musical shows... these shows however, generally deferred to the prejudices of the audiences by reinforcing stereotyped images.... Despite these activities by black writers, no serious, non-musical drama by an Afro-American reached Broadway until 1923, one-hundred fifty years after a white playwright had first presented a black character before white audiences.[2]

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[1] Leonard C. Archer, Black Images in the American Theater (Brooklyn, N. Y., 1973), p. 10.

[2] Darwin Turner, ed., Black Drama in America: An Anthology (Greenwich, Conn., 1971), p. 3.

Clinton Oliver provides a further example of the traditional neglect of black writers in the American theater. His example dwells on the fact that whites were favored over blacks even though the subject matter consisted of black themes and characters:

> From 1917 to 1930 no less than fifteen white playwrights, with various degrees of merit, presented works on the Broadway stage, dealing with Negro themes and characters while only five plays on Negro life by black playwrights managed Broadway production.[1]

Finally, two dramatists speak of more recent rejection of blacks in the theater. Their statements show that rejection of black dramatists existed during the period of the plays to be discussed, 1946-1961. Ted Shine states:

> The professional theater has been reluctant to produce plays by black playwrights. Had Garland Anderson been less aggressive, Appearances, in all probability, would not have been the first full length play by a black writer to reach Broadway. Since its production in 1925, fewer than thirty-five plays by blacks have been produced on the Great White Way. Over the last thirty years there have been fewer than sixty-five plays by blacks presented off Broadway.[2]

Furthermore, Douglas Turner Ward cites a recent example: "During the last decade...despite an eminent handful, Negro dramatists remain sparse in number, productions sporadic at most, and scripts too few to indicate discernable trends."[3]

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1 Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills, eds. "The Negro and the American Theater," Contemporary Black Drama (New York, 1971), p. 28.

2 Ted Shine and Robert Hatcher, eds., Black Theater U.S.A (New York, 1974), x.

3 Douglas Turner Ward, "American Theater: For Whites Only?" in Anthology of the American Negro in the Theater, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1968), p. 81.

Realizing the futility of presenting their plays on Broadway many playwrights retreated to the black community. Leonard Archer states:

> During the first decades of the Twentieth Century black performers were exiled from the downtown theaters; so they moved up-town to Harlem playhouses. All elements of the black theater were together for the first time in the Harlem theaters--actors, writers, musicians, dancers, and producers.[1]

The result of this retreat was a history of black theaters and groups developing within the black community. Some of the more significant groups that existed from the first decades until the period of our plays were The Lafayette Theater (1914), The Krigwa Players (1926), Rose Mc Clendon Players (1938), The Negro Playwrights Company (1940), Committee for the Negro of the Arts (1947), and the Black Arts Repertory Theater (1965).

In the black community the black dramatists found that they could foster positive images and portrayals of black life, speak more directly to the plight of black Americans, and provide training for fellow actors, writers, and technicians. The fundamental concepts of the Kwrigwa Players perhaps best describes those of most theater groups that followed. These concepts emphasize that theater should be (1) about us (blacks), (2) by us, (3) for us, and (4) near us.[2] These pronouncements had proliferations that came down into the present and are readily recognizable in some of the assertions of the black arts and theater movements up to

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1 Leonard Archer, Black Images in the American Theater (Brooklyn, N. Y., 1973), p. 10.

2 For a more detailed description see "Krigwa Players' Little Theater Movement," Crisis, XXXII (July, 1926), 134-136.

the sixties."[1]

Another trend reflects the treatment of black dramatists in the American theater. Black dramatists were expected to portray servile, docile, and happy-go-lucky images of the black man. This trend involves the white insistence upon the projection of negative images of blacks, and the presence of taboos that limited the black playwright usually to comic subject matter. In consideration of the former, Darwin Turner speaks of the limited choice the black playwright had if he wrote for Broadway audiences:

> The first Afro-American dramatists wrote for two audiences. For the downtown audiences they had little choice but to imitate the images already provided by white dramatists and if possible, to modify those images into flattering portraits.[2]

Doris Abramson gives another example of the theater establishment's insistence upon black playwrights projecting negative images of blacks:

> Most Negro playwrights seeking a commercial success in New York, especially on Broadway, have faced the fact that they must appeal to a predominantely white audience. In order to make their plays acceptable to that audience, the playwrights discover that they frequently have to distort the very truths they want to tell about Negro existence.[3]

The black playwright's portraying negative images of blacks was

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1 Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills, eds., "The Negro and the American Theater," Contemporary Black Drama (New York, 1971), p. 20.

2 Turner, Black Drama in America, p. 8.

3 Doris Abramson, Negro Playwrights in the American Theater: 1925-1959 (New York, 1967), x.

further enhanced by the presence of taboos. Two of the most common taboos were (1) picturing blacks making love on stage, and (2) blacks having serious intentions. James Weldon Johnson illustrates the former:

> One of the well known taboos was that there should never be any romantic lovemaking in a Negro play. If anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued. The taboo existed in deference to the superiority stereotype that Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than white people. This taboo had been one of the most strictly observed.[1]

Clinton Oliver, a more recent theater critic, speaks of the taboo on black plays that showed serious intentions:

> Aside from serving as sketch writers and occasional librettists for musical shows, black writers exerted little effort in the writing of plays for the Broadway colossus. When they did, there seemed to be a sense that their efforts would find no market if, in their treatment of Negro life, they were attended by serious intentions.[2]

Thus, the black dramatist faced rejection and biased treatment during the development of American theater. The display of his talent was limited by the white theater establishment which failed to recognize him as an equal. Reinforcement of negative images and stereotypes of blacks were the usual criteria for the black playwright's acceptance by the theater establishment. Comedy was the most popular and acceptable medium for the projection of the negative aspects of blacks. However, it was through this very medium, as we shall see in the plays to be discussed, that mask appears.

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1 James Weldon Johnson, Black Manhattan (New York, 1930), p. 171.

2 Oliver and Sills, Contemporary Black Drama, p. 16.

CHAPTER II

ANTECEDENTS OF MASK

During slavery, the masked attitude and behavior existed. Federick Douglass' description of slaves singing spirituals illustrates the masked attitude and behavior of the slave:

> We were at times remarkedly buoyant, singing hymns and making joyous exclamations, almost as triumphant in their tone as if we had reached a land of freedom and safety. A keen observer might have detected in our repeated singing of
>
> "O Canaan, sweet Canaan,
> I am bound for the land of Canaan,"
>
> something more than a hope of reaching heaven. We meant the North--the North was our Canaan.
>
> "I thought I heard them say,
> There were lions in the way,
> I don't expect to stay
> much longer here,"
>
> was a favorite air and had a double meaning. In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of our company, it simply meant a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery.[1]

W. E. B. Dubois' description of sorrow songs illustrates the masked behavior of the slave:

> I know that these songs are the articulate message of the slave to the World. They tell us in these eager days that life was joyous to the black slave, carefree and happy.... They are the music of an unhappy people, of the children of disappointment, they tell of death and

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[1] Federick Douglass, Life and Times of Federick Douglass (Hartford, Conn., 1882), pp. 196-97.

> suffering and longing toward a truer world, of misty wanderings and hidden ways.[1]

Slaves were forced to project a masked behavior that developed under oppressive conditions while in bondage. This masked behavior is reflected in the slaves' folklore, especially the two most popular forms--folk songs and tales. The use of mask in the plays to be discussed had its antecedents during slavery. In this chapter we will point out the prevalence of mask in folk tales and songs, the most distinctive cultural forms that came out of slavery.[2] In doing so, we will first describe the existence of a slave community. Secondly, we will illustrate the appearance of mask in selected folk songs and tales.

This effort will serve only to illustrate that mask is prevalent in many folk songs and tales of the slaves. Whether the slaves intentionally utilized mask is of little significance, but it appears in the forms their artists created. Folk songs and tales, like the dramatic comedies to be discussed, were created under oppressive conditions. A number of folk songs and tales typify the attitude of many slaves toward the conditions of bondage. The conditions and environments the slave and the dramatists were surrounded by called for a masked behavior. This kind of existence and behavior appears in many of their creations. George C. Grant describes this behavior:

> The life of the Negro slave was tragic; yet he early acquired the ability to appear cheerful while tragedy

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1 W. E. B. DuBois, The Souls of Black Folk (Chicago, 1903), p. 253.

2 John Blassingame, The Slave Community (New York, 1972), p. 49.

> stalked through his soul. This is the very essence of drama. White people misinterpreted the grin on the face of the Negro and ascribed to him a dancing and carefree nature. The deeper feelings, emotions, and soul stirrings were thought to be foreign to his character. The Negro had no choice but to cater to the beliefs of those in power. Consequently, dramatic talent among Negroes had its first expression in comedy.[1]

Thus, the prevalence of mask possibly had its antecedents during slavery.

In a long social process the slaves developed an independent community and culture which molded the slave personality.[2] We may consider this community a "folk community."[3] The folk community reflects the musical and literary conventions of the total people. Since the folk community has many people to communicate with, it insists upon a lasting method. It resorts to art. In its art one might find the use of mask.[4] Folk songs and tales were art forms originated within the folk community.

In essence, the black playwrights and the slaves were parts of two environments. Many black playwrights were part of a Harlem environment which allowed them freedom of artistic expression, but disallowed them the large financial benefits and influential contributors to traditional American theater.[5] The slave was a part of an environment, the slave

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[1] George C. Grant, "The Negro in Dramatic Art," Journal of Negro History, XVII (Jan., 1932), 20-21.

[2] Blassingame, p. 41.

[3] John Lovell, Black Song (New York, 1972), p. 133.

[4] Ibid.

[5] See Chapter I, pp. 4-6 of this thesis.

community, which allowed him a degree of freedom of thought and expression; yet daily he was subjected to toil, exploitation and oppression. Being torn between two environments possibly reinforced the masked behavior of the slave and the playwright. In any society, particularly based upon social hierarchy and exploitation, people at all levels display an extreme ambivalence of personality.[1]

Since the emphasis in this chapter is upon the antecedents of mask, the writer feels it necessary to discuss the environment of the slave community--a folk community. The slave quarters were the center of the slave community. In the slave quarters, slaves often shared their day-to-day experiences and amused themselves with stories, songs and dances. John Blassingame describes the social organization of the slave quarters:

> The social organization of the slave quarters was the slaves primary environment which gave him ethical rules and fostered cooperation, mutual assistance, and black solidarity.... The slaves' culture or social heritage and way of life determined the norms of conduct, defined roles and behavior patterns, and provided a network of individual group relationships which molded personality in the Quarters. The socialization process, shared expectations, ideals, and enclosed status system of the slaves' culture promoted group identification and positive self-concept. His culture was reflected in socialization, family patterns, religion, and recreation.[2]

C. L. R. James places the community within the perspective of this study when he speaks of slaves lowering their mask while in the slave

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1 George P. Rawick, gen. ed., The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography, 19 vols (Westport, Conn., 1971), vol. XI: From Sundown to Sun-up, p.100

2 Blassingame, p. 41.

quarters at night:

> In the slave quarters at night there was a lowering of the mask that covered the day's labor. Bantering and mimicry, gossiping and laughter could be unrestrained. House members regaled other members of the "row"--some who never set foot in the big house--with tales of 'Master" and "Missus," would take them off in speech and gesture so faithful that the less privileged would shake with laughter.[1]

Two ex-slaves give first hand evidence of the happenings that occurred within the slave quarters. According to James Dean, "After work was done the slaves would smoke, sing, tell ghost stories and tales, dance, (and make) music, (With) homemade fiddles."[2] Solomon Northrup describes how his fellow slaves gathered in the quarters to console him after an encounter with his Master Tibeats. He points out how the serious incident was mocked by a slave:

> They all pitied me and tried to console me, and were sad in view of the castigation that awaited me, except Kentucky John. There were no bounds to his laughter; he filled the cabin with cachinations, holding his sides to prevent an explosion, and the cause of his noisy mirth was the idea of my outstripping the hounds. Somehow, he looked at the subject in a comical light. "I know'd dey wouldn't cotch him, when he run cross de plantation. O, delor didn't Platt pick his feet right up, tho' hey? When dem dogs got whar he was he wasn't--haw, haw, haw,! O, delor' a' mighty!--and Kentucky John relapsed into another of his boisterous fits.[3]

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1 C. L. R. James, "The Atlantic Slave Trade and Slavery," in Armistead I, ed. by John A. Williams and Charles F. Harris (New York, 1970), p. 135.

2 Quoted in "The Slave Narrative Collection," Readings in Black American Music, ed. by Eileen Southern (New York, 1972), p. 120.

3 Solomon Northrup, Twelve Years a Slave: Narrative of Solomon Northrup (Auburn, N. Y., 1853), in Puttin' on Ole Massa, ed. by Gilbert Osofsky (New York, 1969), p. 66.

In sum, the slaves usually existed in two environments. The environment we have been concerned with has been the slave quarters where they were allowed to interact with their peers, share ideas, worship, tell stories and tales, sing, and dance. The greater part of folk songs and tales were originated in this environment. However, as we shall see, the subject matter of the tales and songs reflects struggles of the slave outside the slave community. Torn between two worlds, slaves developed a masked behavior. This same behavior is reflected in the masked nature of the many songs and tales that came out of the slave community.

The folk song was an art form generated within the slave community. One might divide folk songs into two categories, religious and secular. Since our concern in this study is with mask within a humorous vein, emphasis will be placed upon the secular songs. "These song types referred to most frequently in ante-bellum literature were rarely religious, and there were many more references to working and dancing than to praying."[1] The song types the writer will be concerned with are worksongs, dance and play songs, and satirical songs. Lyrics from the songs to be discussed display the use of mask.

"Each plantation had its repertory of worksongs which grew out of the work activities of the plantation."[2] Among these were the "corn

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1 Eileen Southern, The Music of Black Americans (New York, 1971), p. 177.

2 Ibid., p. 179.

shucking songs," a term used throughout the South to refer to songs sung at corn-shucking frolics. Although the aim of the slaveholders was to increase productivity from the slaves, corn-shucking frolics were festive occasions. Corn-shucking frolics involved a combination of labor and recreation.[1] An ex-slave, Jasper Battle, describes events at a corn-shucking frolic:

> When us got de corn up from de fields, Niggers came from far and nigh to Marster's cornshucking. Dat corn-shucking work was easy with everybody singing and having a good time together whilst dey made dem shucks fly. De cornshucking captain led all de singing, and set right up on top of de highest pile of corn.[2]

The following are lyrics taken from a corn shucking song:

> Massa in the great house counting out his money,
> Oh shuck that corn and throw it in the barn;
> Mistress in the parlor eating bread and honey,
> Oh shuck that corn and throw it in the big barn.[3]

In the above lines, the originator of the song seemingly recognized the socio-economic standing of the slaves and the master. The slaves were laboring workers and producers, but "Massa" and "Mistress" reaped the benefits.

The dance and play songs was another song type mentioned by Southern. They too were sung in festive atmospheres. They were sung in the type of atmosphere described by Solomon Northrup:

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1 Blassingame, p. 53.

2 Southern, Reading in Black Music, p. 117.

3 Southern, Music of Black Americans, p. 181.

> It is the time (Christmas) of feasting and frolicking, and fiddling--the carnival season with the children of bondage. They are the only days when they are allowed a little restricted liberty, and heartily indeed they do enjoy it.[1]

Fedrick Douglass describes the surrounding atmosphere and lyrics typical of a dance and play song:

> Among a mass of non-sense and wild frolic, once in a while a sharp hint was given to the meanness of slave holders.
>
> We raise de wheat
> Dey gib us de corn
> We bake de bread
> Dey gib us de crust
> We sif de meat
> Dey gib us de huss...[2]

In the abive lyrics the originator of the song also recognizes the socio-economic status of his fellow slaves as well as possible mistreatment and exploitation. This is evidenced by Douglass' reference to a sharp hint to the meanness of slave holders.

Finally, another song type Southern mentions is the satirical songs. "In their songs they (slaves) relate the usage they have received from their masters and mistresses in a very satirical manner."[3] As to what environment satirical songs were created under we will return to Eileen Southern's statement concerning the secular songs, that is, there were

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1 Southern, Readings in Black Music, p. 98.

2 Douglass, p. 146.

3 Southern, Music of Black Americans, p. 185.

many more references to working and dancing than to praying.[1] The following are lyrics taken from a satirical song:

> Oh Massa take that bran' new coat and hang it on the wall
> That darky take the same ole coat and wear it to the ball
>
> Chorus:
> O don't you hear my true long sing,
> O don't you hear him sigh,
> Away down in Sunbury
> I'm bound to die.[2]

As in the other examples a strong satirical comment appears. The lines represents a comment on the status of the slave and slaveholder. Understated is a strong suggestion to the master's exploitation of the slave under the conditions of slavery.

Therefore, in consideration of the masked nature of the lyrics from the secular songs discussed, there are two trends. The songs were created in festive and lively atmospheres. Such atmospheres added to the exaggerated and non-sensical tone of these songs.[3] However, the subject matter of the songs render them sharp attacks on the unjust social hierarchy created by the institution of slavery, and the exploitation and mistreatment of those at the bottom, the slave. The master counts his money, yet the slave labors and toils to produce this currency. The slave raises wheat and bakes the bread, yet they are supplied with

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1 See page 15, footnote 1.

2 Southern, Music of Black Americans, p. 185.

3 Ibid., p. 182.

inferior foodstuffs and lesser by-products. Also, the master's hand-me-down coat is regarded brand new by the slave whom it is usually offered to.[1] The prevalence of sharp satirical comments in songs typical of those used during festive occasions--whether intentional or not--may be considered a use of mask.

The folk tale was another literary art form that was generated within the slave community. Many of these tales were preserved due to thoughtful and concerned folklorists. Perhaps one of the most interesting collections of folktales appear in Zora Neal Hurston's Mules and Men.[2] In contrast to other collections, Miss Hurston "sketched the real black people whom she observed intimately at work and at play as she lived among them--people who were silent and suspicious until she had satisfied them that she belonged in their world.[3] The book displays a cross-section of tales or lies with different themes, for example, those devised to explain the mysteries of nature and life: why the rabbit has a short tail or why some people are black. Also included are those tales that involve a test, for instance, tests that require one to defeat the devil or win a loved one. These tales reflect the masked behavior of the slave and even the story tellers in Miss Hurston's collection. She points out this behavior:

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1 Blassingame, p. 44.

2 Zora Neal Hurston, Mules and Men (Philadelphia, 1935; reprint ed., New York, 1970.

3 Ibid., p. 9.

> And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person, because, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.[1]

Our concern here will be with tales of deep social significance. Tales of this category illustrate the prevalence of mask. The more popular of these tales symbolically praised the shrewdness of black Americans against forces that held them in bondage and later denied them total rights as citizens in a democratic society.[2] Many of these tales pit master against slave or the weak against the powerful. They generate universal themes, symbols, and character types. "Brer Rabbit" and "Trickster John" are the most commonly represented symbols or archetypes in the most popular tales of social significance. Both use wit, guile, and cunning to turn a situation to their own advantage. "Both can be fused for they are continuations of the same thing."[3]

In the animal stories, the weak are usually pitted against the powerful. Brer Rabbit is the dominant character in many of the animal tales. Below he is presented in one of the "why" tales in Hurston's collection, "How the Gator Got Black:"

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1 Ibid., p. 18.

2 Ibid., p. 7.

3 Ibid., p. 305

> Ah'm telling dis lie on de "gator." Well de 'gator was a pretty white varmit wid coal black eyes.... So one day he was layin' up on de grass in a marsh sunnin' hisself and sleepin' when Brer Rabbit come bustin' cross de marsh and run right over Brer Gator before he stopped .... So he ast him, "Brer Rabbit, what you mean by runnin' all cross me and messin' up my clothes lak dis?
>
> ...he says: ..."I got trouble behind me."
>
> Gator ast, "What is trouble? I never heard tell of it befor'."
>
> Rabbit says: "Ah'll show you what trouble is."
>
> Brer Rabbit...set dat marsh afire on every side. All around Brer Gator de fire was burnin' in flames of fire. De 'gator woke up and pitched out to run, but every which a way he run de fire met him. So he hollored and ast him, "Brer Rabbit, whuts going on?"
>
> "Dat's trouble, Brer Gator, Dat's trouble youse in."
>
> And dat's how come a 'gator is black today--'cause de rabbit took advantage of him lak dat.[1]

The humorous tone, the personification of the animal characters, and the absurdity of the conflict gives the tale highly exaggerated dimensions. The story comes across as a witty situational tale or lie. However, masked underneath the witty situational aspect of the tale is a serious confrontation between weak (rabbit) and powerful ('gator) adversaries. The key to deciphering the seriousness of the situation rests with the word "trouble" which is disguised as a pun in the tale. Ironically the rabbit, himself in trouble, reverses the situation. Instead of weakening and running, the rabbit confronts his foe and utilizes his strongest weapon--cunning. He shrewedly surrounds the gator with a fire and places him in the inferior position the rabbit was previously in, "trouble."

"Trickster John" was perhaps closer to the reality of the slaves' environment and attitude than the "Brer Rabbit." This may be due to his

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[1] Ibid., p. 141.

being a human symbol and a multidimensional character who possessed the same strengths and vulnerabilities to which every man is subject.[1] Often he is cast into realistic almost anecdotal-like situations and conflicts. At other times he is presented in superhuman or larger than life roles.

In the brief narrative that follows, John is cast in a realistic situation even though the outcome is exaggerated. The name of the tale is "The Deerstalker:"

> He was a great deer-hunter. He put John on the stand, so when he pass by. Buck with heavy horns ran by, and it frightened John, and he fell flat on his stomack and de deer went by. De deer ran so fast, he fell down a steep hill and broke his neck. And his master came up, and said, "John why didn't you shoot that deer?"--"Marster, it's like dishyer: the way dat deer was goin' to break his own neck.[2]

In realistic tales, John often wound up a victim of his own antics. In the tale that follows, he appears as a slave who often steals hogs from his master in order to supplement his diet. When stealing, the slave usually ties a rope around himself and his mark to insure success. In "The Hog Thief," his attempt to steal a hog backfires:

> ...the hog got unmanageable and broke loose from the old fellow's arms. Still the old man made sure it was all right because of the rope which tied them together, so he puffed and pulled and scuffed, till the hog got the best of him and started him to going down hill. The hog carried him clear to his master's house and the master and his family were sitting on the porch. All the negro could say, as the hog carried him around and around the

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[1] Bruce D. Dickerson, Jr., "The 'John and Old Master' Stories and the World of Slavery: A study in Folktales and History," Phylon, xxxv (Dec., 1974), p. 422.

[2] Ibid., pp. 420-421.

house by his master, was, 'Master, I come to bring your pig home!'[1]

Thus, in both tales John is cast in realistic almost anecdotal situations. However, the tales are masked. In "The Deerstalker" John is portrayed as a servile, docile, and helpless servant. In contrast to his master, supposedly a great hunter, he is an assistant assigned to follow orders. Much worse, too frightened to use even his weapon, he drops to the ground when confronted by a heavy horned buck. In "The Hog Thief" John is portrayed as an untrustworthy servant, unappreciative of the master's food provisions. This is evidenced in the statement "he was to have a big time Saturday."[2] More than that he is unsuccessful in his attempts to steal a hog. Both tales reflect the Southern white viewpoint of blacks being dumb, lazy, docile, and untrustworthy. The tales serve as satires of the white stereotyped viewpoint of Southern blacks.[3]

However, there are covert suggestions masked in the tales. The crux of the story in "The Deerslayer" lies in John's transgression of one of the normal rules of slavery--he failed to follow his master's orders.[4] But, with his cunning he manages to come up with a shrewd excuse for his misconduct. Further understated is the reference to the

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1 Ibid., p. 421.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 428.

4 Ibid., p. 424.

master being a great hunter, yet he subjects the slave to the most dangerous task in the hunt. In "Hog Thief," John attempts a very serious act, but the irony lies in the fact that he failed to execute the act. The reason that John's failure is ironical is best expressed by Bruce Dickerson:

> Indeed the fact that John often failed probably lent strength to the rejection of the slave system, for such failure merely emphasized that in the struggle between slave and master, the slave was not likely to give up due to a temporary setback, nor would temporary victory be enough to lessen the chances of future conflict. Rather, conflict and struggle were conceived as the very essence of the relationship between slave and master and would figure in black Southerners' perceptions of every dealing which they were to have with whites.[1]

In Zora Neal Hurston's collection of tales, John is often presented as a figure larger than life. Often conflicts with his master are exaggerated. The following two tales contains examples of John's larger than life representation. In "Member Youse a Nigger," John's master promises him freedom if he completes a certain task. John completes the task, but his master has a change of heart. However, John ignores the attempts by the master to keep him in bondage--he steps on to Canada:

> Far as John could hear him down the road he wuz hollerin', "John, oh John!--De children loves you. And I love you. De missy like you."
> "But member youse a nigger,--tho!"
> Ole massa kept callin' im' and his voice was pitiful. But John kept right on steppin to Canada. He answered Old Massa every time he called im', but consumed on with his bag.[2]

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1 Ibid., p. 428.

2 Hurston, p. 122.

In the next tale, "Ah'll Beatcher Makin' Money," John tricks his master into drowning himself. After being tricked several times by John, his master attempted to place the slave in a sack and throw him into the river. But, John paid a toad frog to free him while the master was away looking for more weights to insure that the slave sinks to the bottom of the river. John then went into town and obtained a horse and some money by fortune telling. The tale goes as recorded:

> ...so John went by Massa's house on a new horse, wid a sack of money tied on each side of the saddle. Ole Massa seen 'im and ast, "oh John, where'd you git all dat?"
>
> "Ah tole you if you throw me into de river Ah'd beatcher makin' money."
>
> Massa ast, "Reckon if Ah let you throw me in de river, Ah'd make all dat?"
>
> John got ole Massa in de sack and keered 'im down de river. John didn't forgit his weights. He put de weights on ole Massa and jus' befo' he throwed im' out he said, "Goodbye, Massa, Ah hope you find all you lookin' for.
>
> And dat wuz de las' of ole Massa.[1]

In these two tales, John is presented as larger than life. In the first tale, John blatantly disregards his master's orders. The lines, "kept right on steppin' to Canada," is an hyperbole which gives John's rebellious act an exaggerated effect. Thus, John's stepping on until he reaches Canada makes him larger than life. In this tale the story teller seems to be exaggerating a serious incident to disguise another underlying meaning. As John continues to ignore his master's pleas he is defying one of the codes of the master-slave hierarchy.[2] The exaggeration of the incident assuages its true seriousness. In "Ah'll Beatcher

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1 Ibid., p. 64.

2 See page 22, footnote 4.

Makin' Money," the story teller places John in direct confrontation with the establishment, symbolized by the master. His defiance of the system here is of a more serious nature than in the previously mentioned tales for he actually destroys his master. He defeats and kills his master by sheer trickery and deceit which tends to lessen the seriousness of the incident. This seriousness is further lessened by the master's statement, "if ah let you throw me in de river." Thus, once again the technique of mocking a serious incident by exaggerating the conflict appears in a folk tale.

The tales we have discussed display the use of mask in three ways all of which are reflected in the situations or conflicts involving the hero, John. In one tale he is portrayed as a servile, docile, servant, yet in understatement he defies the established norms dictated by the master-slave hierarchy. In another tale he fails in his attempt to steal his master's hog; however, his failure added to his multidimensional character and keeps him closer to the realities of the victories and defeats for the slaves while in constant confrontations with their masters. Finally, John is presented in larger than life fashion, a technique which lends to exaggeration of the conflicts and incidents he is involved in. He defies or confronts the establishment as symbolized by his incidents with his master, but his deeds are exaggerated beyond their seriousness. Therefore, the general technique used by the storytellers in the tales is seemingly to present entertaining, humorous tales. However, masked within these tales are usually situations or conflicts between the folk hero and his adversary which are serious in nature. Our plays carry a similar technique.

CHAPTER III

ST. LOUIS WOMAN AND SIMPLY HEAVENLY

In the previous chapter, it has been shown that slave folk artists usually created their tales and songs in festive and leisurely atmospheres. The primary functions of their songs and tales were entertainment and amusement. Thus, they usually originated humorous, hilarious, sometime true-to-life, sometime fantastical creations.[1] Furthermore, the contradictions reflected in the songs and the conflicts of the heroes in the tales are usually of a serious nature.

In essence, the disguising of a serious conflict with a humorous mask seems to be a frequently used technique for the presentation of an underlying message consciously or unconsciously understated by the originators of the songs and tales. The variations of this device lie in the types of contradictions portrayed in the songs and conflicts of the heroes in the tales. This use of mask is prevalent in the comedies St. Louis Woman, by Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen; Simply Heavenly, by Langston Hughes; Trouble in Mind, by Alice Childress; and Purlie Victorious, by Ossie Davis. In these plays, the playwrights offer humorous, situational dramatic pieces, each of which actually serves individually as a mask. However, underneath this humorous guise the protagonists in

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[1] According to J. Mason Brewer, "black folk art usually succumbs to the basic formulae of humor which he lists as (1) the feeling of power in the midst of misery, (2) the primary intent of amusement, (3) use as a morale booster." Quoted in Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor, ed. by Henry C. Spalding (New York, 1972), xiii.

the plays are involved in conflicts of serious dimensions.

In the two remaining chapters, we will demonstrate the types of conflicts each protagonist in the different plays is subjected to. These conflicts are patterned in two different ways. In St. Louis Woman and Simply Heavenly, both musical comedies, the protagonists are presented in confrontation with misdirected value systems caused by their existence in an environment fostered by denial of equal opportunity to blacks. On the other hand, in Trouble in Mind and Purlie Victorious, the protagonists are presented in direct confrontation with those who would deny blacks their equal opportunity in this society. In this chapter the writer will be concerned with the first two plays.

As with most blacks in this society, the playwrights of these comedies were exposed to two environments, that of their ethnic bounds and that of an alien cultural force which dictated the norms, values, and quality of livelihood they are restricted to in this society. The latter world limited the black playwright to the presentation of contradictory portrayals of his race and community where a people dwell who have made significant contributions to American Society as a whole. The display of these contradictions underneath the guise of humor is typical of the masked behavior of blacks forced to exist in these two worlds.

St. Louis Woman concerns itself with the attempts by Lil Augie, a successful jockey, to win over the affections of Della Green, a beautiful woman highly admired by his peers. He succeeds in winning over Della from his strongest rival, Biglow Brown, a reputable saloon keeper who tries to avenge his loss of Della to Augie and in the process is killed

by a former girl-friend. Before dying Biglow places a curse on Augie. After he is cursed by the dying Biglow, Augie starts to lose his races consistently. To add to his misfortunes, Augie loses Della. She leaves Augie to work for another rival for her affections and saloon keeper Rags. However, Augie eventually realizes that his bad luck is more psychological than supernatural. He thus gains his confidence and starts to win again. Augie later wins a race that for all purposes would determine that he had overcome Giblow's curse. After winning the race he wins Della back.

St. Louis Woman is a light, amusing boy-meet-girl situation comedy done in the Broadway musical tradition of the mid-forties. It is set in the gay era of the late 1890's on St. Louis' Targee Street, a place of honky tonks, colorfully dressed "macks"[1] and fancy women, and well-to-do jockeys. It was the time of successful jockeys, big bets, and cakewalk contests, an era that gave birth to ragtime music. However, underneath this facade of humor and gaiety, the protagonist is involved in a conflict of serious dimensions.

Augie's conflict can be interpreted as his struggle with a misdirected value system. He first fails to associate his winning of Della's affections with his good-natured and good-humored personality rather than his material offerings to her. Secondly, he fails to associate his winning ways with the reality of his being a talented and

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[1] Man supported by prostitute or lover. See The American Thesaurus of Slang, ed. by Melvin Van Den Bark and Lester V. Berry (New York, 1942), p. 416 and p. 472.

skilled jockey rather than luck. Basing his relationship on materialistic and superstitious notions, he loses Della. Only until he redirects his valus system to revealing his true worth to Della and attributing his winnings to his skills as a jockey does Augie win her back.

Augie's misdirected value system is portrayed in several ways. In one sense he attempts to attract Della to him by boasting of his success and financial status, "I got greenbacks on me worser'n a dog got fleas. I got money in my shoes, money in my hat, money in the lining of my clothes, and money hanging round my neck." Della's only response to Augie's boast is an understatement, "sure enough."[1]

In other instances Augie's misdirected value system is displayed in his inability to see that Della values him for the person that he is rather than for his status and money. In an early exchange Della pretends that she is unaware of who the well-known jockey is:

> AUGIE. You St. Louis Woman is a mess! I ain't strange gal. I'm little Augie.
>
> DELLA. Lil Augie what?
>
> AUGIE. Lil Augie what you reads about!
>
> DELLA. Oh (after a slight pause) but I ain't read about no Lil Augie.
>
> AUGIE. You must be can't read. How come you think all this 'miration bust out when I come in.
>
> DELLA. I don't know. You look like any other lil bitty man to me.[2]

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[1] Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen, St. Louis Woman in Black Theater, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1971), Act I, sc. 2, p. 9.

[2] Ibid.

Della's non-material motives are further revealed in the next act. She states, "I ain't never been so happy in all my born days! I got a home and a man. I guess even a woman like me wants that." She also reveals her motives in the lines from a song, "I'm gonna love you like nobody loved you/COME RAIN OR COME SHINE.[1] Later when Augie mentions marriage to Della she replies, "that's what I been wantin' more than anything in the world."[2] Finally, she tells Biglow why she chose Augie over him:

> You was good enough, Biglow, for you kind. But you was too free with your fists. Little Augie ain't like that. He likes to see me sattin and smooth. He don't like to see no bruises on my arms, nor my eyes swelled up. He's good to me, Biglow. He makes me feel like singing. I loves Lil Augie. We going to be married, Biglow.[3]

Augie's misdirected value system is also seen in his superstitious outlook toward his success and fortune. Below he sings of his luck:

> A four-leaf clover looked me in the eye
> And jumped in my lapel
> A lucky seven rolled from out the sky
> And rang that joyful bell...
>
> A lucky horseshoe
> Flew up and hit me
> New suit and dicty lid
> Call me the candy kid
> I feel my luck comin' down.[4]

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1 Ibid., Act. II, sc. 1, p. 19.

2 Ibid., Act. II, sc. 1, p. 23.

3 Ibid., p. 23.

4 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 2, pp. 8-9.

Augie later claims that he is going to win Della by luck, "lucky dust, the only kind I has anything to do with. I'd like to throw so much of that in your eyes till you couldn't see nobody but me."[1] After, winning Della's affections Augie discloses that his luck will be instrumental in his keeping her. "Oh I was borned lucky. Borned with a veil. That's sure enough lucky. And anybody what takes up with me gets lucky, too, if you loves me hard enough."[2]

Thus, Augie pursued Della's hand as if he was riding toward one of his victories. In winning her affections he viewed his victory as lucky. To him she is a symbol of status and success. She is a "race hoss,"--"a prize,"--and a woman to be viewed as "high-up and proud." His misdirected value system is symbolized by his failure to see Della beyond his conceptions of status and luck. Thus, their relationship is primarily based on superstitious beliefs and materialistic values.

The events after Biglow's curse point out the fallacy of Augie's associating Della with material values and superstitious beliefs. Della is easily persuaded by Augie's trainer, Badfoot, and sister, Leah, to leave the ill-fated jockey, "you got to leave him,"--"you ain't good for him."[3] In the exchange below she takes advantage of his misdirected value system and uses it as a tool to leave him:

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1 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 1, p. 10.

2 Act. II, sc. 1, p. 19.

3 Act. III, sc. 1, pp. 30-31.

DELLA. Lil Augie, this is the end. I'm goin' to quit you.

AUGIE. No Della, no!

DELLA. Your luck done change, it's leavin' time.

AUGIE. (Bewildered) I don't understand, Della. I know my luck done change. I know we can't live like we used to, but yesterday you said it didn't make no never-mind to you.

DELLA. (Hysterically) Don't talk to me 'bout yesterday and what I said then. That's gone. "Member what you said 'bout you couldn't stand it 'lesson I looked like a picture on the wall? "Member what you said 'bout the ring of roses 'round the winner's neck?

AUGIE. I guess you's right, Della. Pretty womens like you was made for lucky mens.[1]

However, when Augie later starts to win again, his materialistic and superstitious sense of values have changed. Below, Augie sees Della beyond her material worth. The materialistic images and symbols he once associated Della with are now the antithesis to his new sense of values. This is symbolized below as Augie tells how he viewed her prior to his change:

> But I reckon I loved you too hard. I had dust in my eyes. Not lucky dust, Della. Just plain old dirty race track dust. All I could see when I was ridin' through them clouds was you. I thought you was more than a picture, but you ain't. You ain't made for nothin' but proud clothes and rings. You got diamonds in your ears and pearls round your neck and a great big lump of gold where your heart oughta be.[2]

Furthermore, Augie no longer associates his success nor failure with

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1 Ibid., Act. III, sc. 1, p. 32.

2 Ibid., Act. III, sc. 3, p. 35.

superstition:

> Don't say nothin' to me 'bout luck. I been round a heap these last six months, and can't nobody talk to me 'bout luck now. I've growed up, Della. I know can't no one jockey win all the races. We up today and we down tomorrow, and that's how it goes all the time with everything.[1]

Augie is prepared to start a new relationship. This time he sees his relationship with Della with a new sense of values. This new sense of values is based primarily on love, "but you, gal, you and me...that was somethin' better than luck, that was love."[2] Below is further evidence of his changed sense of values:

> High luck or low luck or no luck at all,
> I'll never care if I rise or I fall
> I learned a lesson since we've been apart
> I'll do all right if I follow my heart.[3]

In sum, St. Louis Woman is a comical mask. Underneath the mask exists a struggle between the protagonist and his psychologically misdirected sense of values. The values the playwrights suggest that blacks follow might be summed-up in the following lyrics:

> I say this with impunity
> If you sieze your opportunity
> You will thrive in your community
> Least THATS MY OPINION
> .....
>
> In conclusion, I reiterate
> Educated or illiterate
> Work is what you can't obliterate

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1 Ibid., Act. III, sc. 3, p. 36.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

Rent is high
.....

You can't collect
Till you learn to correct
The mistakes you make in youth
Take a philosophic attitude
And allow yourself some latitude
Folks will smile right back in gratitude.[1]

Thus we find under the humorous facade of St. Louis Woman a protagonist in conflict with his misdirected value system. Augie's conflict is symbolic of blacks who due to material wish-fulfillment or superstitious beliefs fail to practice an alternative value system positive to the upgrading of their communities, race, and nation. It points out the psychological misdirection that is the result of a negatively perpetrated environment. For example, Augie and Biglow Brown are well-to-do, but only as rags-to-riches types whose material assets are really liabilities to the total community. Biglow is a bar owner, and mack. Augie is a successful jockey who squanders away his accumulation on liquor, alcohol, clothes, etc. However, Della ironically does not seek material advantages, she seeks only happiness. She symbolizes the desire of elements in communities with values of negative dimensions to change the sterile aspect of its value system. Augie's change becomes a desirable realization. One can "correct" one's value system in a negatively perpetrated environment and begin to collect assets redeemable for a positive existence. Della is one of those assets.

The plot in Simply Heavenly is similar to that in St. Louis Woman, but with a few variations. The protagonist, Jess P. Simple, seeks closer

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[1] Ibid., Act III, sc. 4, p. 37.

ties with a woman that he feels symbolizes success, achievement, and status. He seeks to marry Joyce, "a quiet girl more inclined toward club work than good-timing."[1] To marry her would mean "getting somewhere in the world."[2] However, Simple's quest is surrounded by his frivolous relations with his friends at Paddy's Bar highlighted by his off and on associations with his "bar-stool" mistress, Zarita; his constant moral and ethical bouts with Joyce; and his continuous gibes at conditions in his landlady's rooming house.

The above mentioned circumstances find Simple in zany, hilarious, almost slapstick situations throughout the play. He is lured by Zarita to ride over the bridge to a little after-hour spot which results in his being skinned on his "hokis pokis" due to an auto mishap. On his birthday, Zarita and his friends impose a surprise party on him, but the real surprise turns out to be the unexpected appearance of Joyce. In one of his moral bouts with Joyce he obeys her orders to turn around while she dresses, but he happens to also turn inside-out and peeps through his legs. Finally, he sarcastically lets his landlady know his reason for burning Chinese incense--"to keep warm."

Hence, Simple's antics and his environment lend to the to the humorous framework of the play. However, this framework serves as a mask, for underneath Simple is engaged in a serious conflict with economic barriers that occur as the result of his being a "colored swinner" in a

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1 Langston Hughes, Simply Heavenly, in Black Drama, p. 177.

2 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 3, p. 179.

"great big old white ocean,"[1] a world where "there's something always happening to a colored man."[2] In his quest to settle down with Joyce he is confronted with one set back after another. This is illustrated in the difficulty of his accumulating the necessary funds for paying off his third of the divorce fee and his being laid off his job after purchasing his part of the divorce papers. "There's always," says Simple, "that old trying to save money rock,"--a rock that he has to break for it has really been his "stumbling rock."[3]

One of the key economic obstacles to Simple's pursuit of Joyce's hand in marriage is represented by his inability to secure the necessary funds for obtaining a divorce from his wife. In the passage quoted below he discusses the casual aspects of his inability to save money for the purchase of the divorce:

> HOPKINS. I thought you said that man in Baltimore loved your wife so much he was willing to pay for the whole divorce.
>
> SIMPLE. Inflation's got him--so he just made one down payment. Isabel writ that if I would make one payment now, she would make one, then everybody could marry right away. But, I cannot meet a payment now--with the hospital bill, rent up, food up, phones up, cigarettes up--everything up--but my salary. Divorces are liable to go up, too, if I don't hurry up and pay up....[4]

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1 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 7, p. 198.

2 Ibid., Act. II, sc. 5, p. 211.

3 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 7, p. 198.

4 Ibid., Act. I, sc. 5, p. 193.

Later in the play, Simple does manage to save enough money to purchase the divorce. Nevertheless, he meets with another set-back to his plans. He gets laid off his job. Below he tells Joyce of the occurrence:

> SIMPLE. No sugar, thats (divorce) all filed, paid for, ought to be ready for the seal soon. Something else has come up, It's that--it's that--well, the notice come last week that it was coming. I just didn't tell you--I'm being laid off my job.... Everytime a Negro plans something--[1]

Thus, Simple's quest for the hand of Joyce is delayed because of economic barriers. In this light, Simple's conflict is "simply" to live a simple existence. Nonetheless, his desires are complicated by economic barriers. The following statement made by Simple describes the complex existence of many blacks which he associates with his own existence.

> Stormy weather! Boyd, I been caught in some kind of riffle ever since I been black. All my life, if it ain't raining, it's blowing. If it ain't sleeting, it's snowing. Man, you try to be good, and what happens? You look back and find out you didn't live right. Even when you're working, and you try to save money, what happens? Can't do it. Your shoes is wore out. Or the dentist has got you. You try to save again. What happens? You drunk it up. Try to save another time. Some relative gets sick and needs it. What happens to money, Boyd? What happens?[2]

The serious nature of Simple's conflict is further evidenced in his determination to succeed despite the complexities of his existence. Hughes describes his protagonist as one who "tries hard to succeed, but for whom the chips seldom fall just right. Yet he bounces back like a rubber ball."[3] Simple's determination to succeed despite the economic

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[1] Ibid., Act. II, sc. 2, p. 203.

[2] Ibid., Act. II, sc. 5, p. 211.

[3] Ibid., p. 168.

barriers placed before him is best illustrated in his singing of John Henry:

> They say John Henry won a prize,
> And they say he gave his life to win that prize.
> .....
>
> Well, theres a prize I'm gonna win,
> And the time's long gone I should begin.
> .....
>
> So right now, I'm gonna start to win.
> .....
>
> Another great big mountain's in the way,
> It takes a long haul to get there, so they say,
> But I'm gonna make it through
> If it's the last damn thing I do.
> I'm gonna be John Henry, be John Henry,
> I'm gonna be John Henry, too.[1]

In essence, Simple shows determination to overcome the economic barriers placed before him. The serious implications of his conflict are symbolized by the references to determination in the song about John Henry. They allude to the fact that Simple is about to wage a struggle to overcome his conflict. This struggle becomes ironic in the sense that Simple only sought a simple life, "with a good job and a good wife man, it'll be like Joyce used to say when I kissed her, "simply heavenly."[2] Nonetheless, he must involve himself in a complex struggle to achieve his goal. Simple's conflict symbolizes that of many blacks. They merely seek a simple existence, yet the complexities of their environment will not allow them to reach their goals without a confrontation.

In conclusion, we have seen two different approaches to the technique of presenting a dramatic creation that carries a humorous facade,

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[1] Ibid., Act. I, sc. 7, p. 199.

[2] Ibid., Act. II, sc. 9, p. 215.

yet underneath the protagonist is involved in a conflict of serious dimensions. In St. Louis Woman, Augie's conflict lies in his struggle with a misdirected value system in the form of materialistic wish-fulfillment--a kind of "rags-to-riches narrow materialism."[1]

In Simply Heavenly, Simple's conflict lies in his struggle to live merely a simple existence. As we have seen, Augie is confronted with psychological barriers, whereas Simple is confronted with economic barriers. Both are figures confronting negatively perpetrated values, mores, and habits generated within their environments, Targee Street and Harlem. Augie desires a high order of materialistic participation which makes him symbolic of blacks who fail to seek an alternative positive value system for uplifting their community and race. Simple's quest is low key; thus he is symbolic of blacks whose simple demands for equal participation in this society are made complex by imposed limitations as a result of the narrow-minded segments of this society. The display of these contradictions and conflicts by the playwrights is responsible for the masked nature of the plays we have thus far discussed.

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1 Charles A. Reich, The Greening of America (New York, 1970), p. 21.

CHAPTER IV

MASK AND THE BLACK HERO ARCHETYPE

In her study of the psychological significance of poetry, Maud Bodkin describes what she terms "archetypes" or "archetypal patterns" as "themes having a particular form or pattern which persists amid variation from age to age, and which corresponds to a pattern or configuration of emotional tendencies in the minds of those who are stirred by the theme."[1] These patterns manifest themselves in dreams, myths, and literature. They are recurring experiences which have happened not to the individual, but to his ancestors, and of "which the results are inherited in the structure of the brain, a priority determinants of individual experience."[2] Archetypes have appeared in such forms as birth, death, rebirth, hero, God, Devil, water, etc. Our concern here is with the hero archetype.

The hero archetype has appeared consistently in literature of all cultures. It has appeared in relation to the racial experiences of a particular culture, "the social inheritance of meanings stored in language which comes to us from our ancestors, and wakens into activity the potentialities of our inherited nature."[3] Samuel Yvette describes the

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1 Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London, 1934), p. 2.

2 Ibid., p. 1.

3 Ibid., p. 24.

traditional types these have appeared as universally:

> Heroes throughout the world have traditionally came in two major types: (1) the tragic hero--one willing to suffer tragedy, even death, in order to embody, to uphold, the values of his/her society and (2) the comic hero--one who shows how values can be adjusted to the society with a minimum of inconveniences or loss.[1]

These hero types have been consistent to the racial experiences of Western cultures especially in the presentation of the tragic and comic hero in works of Greek, Roman, French, English, and German origin.

The social inheritance of the black American has been unique in the sense that he has inherited a triad of experiences. He has inherited within his collective conscience racial experiences from his African ancestry. However, his exposure to slavery attached another experience under oppressive conditions. Presently, he has assimilated his residual African experiences with those of a European base in a climate of illusory freedom. Thus, his heroes have more or less represented symbols of resisters against the established norms, mores, and ideals of a cultural force alien to his African based racial experiences. Initially subjected to bondage and later denied equal rights in his society, this hero type cannot uphold the values of a society that he has never been totally considered a part of. Instead he becomes an overt or covert resister to the oppression of his fellow victims.

According to the racial experiences of blacks, two distinct hero archetypes appear in the literature of black Americans. First, the overt

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[1] Samuel Yvette, "Muhammad Ali and the Media," Black World 24 (Jan., 1975), 27.

resister to the perpetrators of the oppression of himself and his people. This type usually meets his fate as a misunderstood and rejected hero or more often a martyr. As a covert resister, he appears as a comic figure who resists the oppression through cunning, deception, or trickery. He is much like his European counterpart who adjusts to the status-quo of his society with a minimum of loss and inconvenience.

In this chapter we will examine two ways in which the Black hero archetype is presented in the comedies Trouble in Mind and Purlie Victorious. In Trouble in Mind, the black hero traits of the protagonist, Wiletta, are presented under the guise of a realistic incident set during a play rehearsal. She is symbolic of our overt resister. In Purlie Victorious, the traits of the protagonist, Purlie, are presented under the guise of an expressionistic, whimsical, and fantastical arrangement. Purlie is symbolic of our comic resister. We will further see that unlike Augie and Simple, Wiletta and Purlie are in direct confrontation with the causes of their oppression, while Augie and Simple are in confrontation with the effects of their oppression. In essence, our primary intent in this chapter is to discover two more uses of mask in black comedy.

In his article "The Misunderstood and Rejected Hero in the Plays of Aime' Cesaire," Robert Smith describes a black hero archetype that appears in the plays of Aime' Cesaire, the renowned black playwright from Martinique. Smith states:

> We witness his intense, passionate and black revolution as he presents these heroes who are more sensitive than others to the misfortunes, injustices, and absurdities of life. They evoke sympathy. They cannot accept

> mediocrity, lethargy, cowardice, disunity, servile imitation and lack of perserverance, and thus they become outsiders.... They do not run and hide from their destinies, but on the contrary they sacrifice their lives for a cause which they believe. They protest against slavery and refuse an old corrupt world replete with social injustice.[1]

Wiletta and Purlie display traits similar to the black hero archetype portrayed by Cesaire. Alice Childress and Ossie Davis present protagonists in humorous roles, yet these very heroes are revealed as being sensitive to the misfortunes, absurdities, and injustices of black existence in this society. They reject subservient roles usually assigned to blacks. They cannot accept mediocrity, apathy, cowardice, and lack of perseverance. They refuse to run from their destinies and are willing to make sacrifices for their cause. They protest and refuse to accommodate themselves to the traditional atmosphere replete with social injustice. However, Wiletta's resistance is overt, whereas Purlie's resistance is covert.

Trouble in Mind concerns an aging black actress, Wiletta, who had proved a loyal subject to the status-quo of the theater establishment. She has played the servile and menial roles assigned to her and exercised the mannerisms expected of blacks in the theater throughout her career. However, during the rehearsal of a play she is to appear in she questions the motives of the character she is playing, a bewildered southern black mother who attempts to persuade her son to give himself to what the actress interprets as a "lynch mob." Her questioning of the mother's motives leads Wiletta into a bitter confrontation with the director of

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[1] Robert Smith Jr., "The Misunderstood and Rejected Hero in the Plays of Aime' Cesaire," CLA Journal, 16 (Sept., 1972), 7.

the play, Manners. Wiletta then refuses to participate any further in what she terms as a "lie." By questioning the motives of the character she is portraying and even suggesting some changes, Wiletta violates one of the standing taboos blacks in the theater were supposed to observe, "she gave her honest opinion of the play."[1] After Wiletta violates the taboo, Manners attempts to reprimand her, but she holds firm to her point of view. The bewildered Manners, his latent racism exposed during the exchange, walks out on the play. A sometimes sympathetic and sometimes reprimanding cast also leaves the rehearsal. At the end of the play Wiletta, still firm in her convictions makes a speech before an empty auditorium.

Throughout the play Wiletta demonstrates her credentials as a black hero archetype. At certain points during the play she displays a sensitivity to the misfortunes, absurdities, and injustices blacks had to endure in the theater and society. At the beginning of the play she attempts to give pointers on how to survive as a black in the theater to a young neophyte, John Nevins. While doing so she displays her sensitivity to the shortcomings of blacks in the theater. First, she tries to discourage him from pursuing a career in the theater, "you look bright enough to be a doctor or even a lawyer maybe...you don't have to take what I've been through...don't have to take it off em," also, she states, "show business, it's just a business, colored folks ain't in no theater." She then gives him some pointers on how he has to behave if he plans to

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[1] Alice Childress, Trouble in Mind in Black Theater, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1971), Act. I, p. 140.

survive as a career black actor in the theater: "they want us to be naturals...don't get too cocky...laugh at everything they say." Finally, she gives him some pointers on the politics of criticism: "just say you're crazy about it (the play)...don't study it, learn it."[1]

Later in the play Wiletta's sensitivity to the shortcomings of blacks in the society is portrayed. In a word association game with Manners she relates words that suggest racism, injustice, and oppression during the period the play had its first performances. Some of the words she conveyed were, "Alabama...Reverend King is speaking on Sunday ...lights changin' colors all around me...they--they...they got any colored in that buildin'... Children--children--"pick up that paper! Oh, my... Killin'! Killin'!"[2]

Wiletta's similarity to the black hero archetype is displayed as she shows her rejection of the subservient role usually assigned to blacks by whites. This is demonstrated when Manners notices a piece of paper he previously threw on the floor; however, when a white cast member bends over to pick it up he utters, "hold your position--Wiletta, pick up the paper," and as John and Sheldon, the black male cast members, try to pick it up for her also he continues, "I asked Wiletta!" This gesture by Manners causes Wiletta for the moment to shed her mask of subservience, "well, hell--I ain't the dam janitor!" The shaken director then attempts to deceive the cast into believing that his prior action was merely a

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1 Ibid., Act. I, pp. 139-140.

2 Ibid., Act. I, p. 152.

stage exercise, "what you have just seen (from Wiletta) is fine acting ...that is the quality I want in your work...the firm texture of truth."[1] Ironically Wiletta does reveal a truth, that she is capable of defying theater authority. She thus reveals latent heroic tendencies.

Wiletta is also portraying refusal to accept mediocrity, apathy, cowardice, and lack of perseverance by blacks. Prior to the climatic confrontation between Wiletta and Manners, she sheds her traditional mask and displays the characteristics of a black hero type. In the following scene she displays her rejection of subservience, mediocrity, apathy, cowardice, and lack of perseverance:

> WILETTA. Tell me, why this boy's people turned against him? Why we sendin' him out into the teeth of a lynch mob? I'm his mother and I'm sendin' him to his death. This is a lie.
>
> JOHN. But his mother doesn't understand...
>
> WILETTA. Everything people do is counta their mother...well, may be so.
>
> JOHN. There have been cases of men dragged from their homes...for voting and asking others to vote.
>
> WILETTA. But they was dragged...they come with guns and dragged them out. They weren't sent to be killed by their mama. The writer wants the damn white man to be the hero--and I'm the villain.
>
> .....
>
> WILETTA. Judge Willis! Why don't his people help him?
>
> MANNERS. The story goes a certain way and...
>
> WILETTA. It oughta go another way.
>
> .....

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[1] Ibid., Act. I, p. 146.

WILETTA. (To Sheldon) And you echoin' every word he (Manners) says--keep him on his knees."[1]

Finally, the above exchange leads into a direct confrontation between Wiletta and Manners. He challenges her and is determined to win the conflict. But, Wiletta remains undaunted, "I'm playin' a leading part and I want this script changed or else."[2] Wiletta, an actress who ironically stayed in her place throughout her career suddenly stands up for her rights no matter what the consequences--"or else." She accepts her destiny and refuses to run from her cause. She 'wants to be an actress ...hell I'm gonna be one...!"[3] However, Wiletta is left alone in her quest, as often is the black hero type. The cast finds excuses for not supporting her stand, especially the black members: "I know what's right but I need the job," or "maybe I'll get another job," or "I still owe the doctor money."[4] Even in her solitude she refuses to run from her destiny: 'to stand forth at my best...to stand up and do anything I want."[5] But, she stands before an empty auditorium and receives only "canned applause."[6]

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1 Ibid., Act. II, pp. 169-170.

2 Ibid., Act. II, p. 172.

3 Ibid., Act. I, p. 154.

4 Ibid., Act. II, pp. 172-173.

5 Ibid., Act. II, p. 172.

6 A sound effect device used on the stage to give the effect of an audience in front of a character making a speech.

Within the guise of a comedy-drama we have seen a black hero type in direct confrontation with her oppressor. Wiletta's overt confrontation is symbolic of many blacks who protest and refuse to remain silent in an atmosphere of social injustice. Nevertheless, in their effort to stand forth at their best and "do what they want," they usually wind up at best with no audience but themselves. For their efforts they often receive canned applause. "Black history itself may well be described as a Human Comedy performed on an alien stage before an unresponsive audience."[1]

Our fourth play, Purlie Victorious, concerns the efforts of a Southern black minister, Purlie Victorious, to claim a $500 inheritance allegedly due to his Cousin Bee so that he can purchase a church formerly pastored by his grandfather. The inheritance is kept by an old bigoted plantation owner Captain Cotchipee who also owned the church building, "Big Bethel." Cotchipee was also the same culprit who bullwhipped Purlie when he was younger and ran him out of the country. Purlie first attempts to deceive the Ol' Captain into releasing the $500 inheritance by attempting to disguise a simple country girl, Luttiebell Gussie Mae Jenkins, as his Cousin Bee. However, Luttiebell is unable to imitate the actually deceased school teacher. Thus, the Ol' Captain is not fooled and attempts to have Purlie arrested. Later, the Captain's liberal son, Charlie, signs the church building over to Purlie. The shock of such an act kills the Captain. Ironically he is funeralized in Big Bethel with Purlie being

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[1] Henry C. Spalding ed., Encyclopedia of Black Folklore and Humor (New York, 1772), xiii.

the presiding Minister. Later he is buried in a standing position.

On the surface, Purlie is a caricature of an Afro-American nationalist. His actions are exaggerated beyond any serious implications. For example, when he climatically claims to have beaten Captain Cotchipee to death, "I beat him--I whipped him--and I flogged him--and I cut him--I destroyed him!" But, Missy, a maid for Ol' Captain, exposes Purlie's lie by announcing that there was no harm done to the Captain. Purlie responds to his exposure in the fashion of his caricature, I didn't mean for them not to be so: "It was a--a parable! A prophecy! Believe me! I ain't never in all my life told a lie I didn't mean to make come true someday!"[1]

Thus, Purlie is viewed as a caricature. He is the comic black hero type who exercises covert resistance and rebels with a minimum of inconvenience or loss. However, as we viewed the antics of his forerunner, John, we must look at Purlie's resistance and confrontation with the establishment in a symbolic sense. In this light Purlie symbolically displays many of the traits characteristic of the black hero archetype. Like Wiletta, he is sensitive to the misfortunes, absurdities, and injustices blacks have had to endure in this society. He rejects mediocrity, apathy, cowardice, and lack of perseverance. He welcomes his destiny and is willing to make sacrifices for his cause.

Below we find Purlie displaying his sensitivity to the misfortunes, absurdities, and injustices blacks have to endure in this society:

> PURLIE. That a man the color of his face--could live by the sweat of a man the color of mine!

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[1] Ossie Davis, Purlie Victorious in Black Drama, Act. III, sc. 1, p. 315.

LUTIEBELL. Work with him Lawd, work with him!

PURLIE. --Could live away up there in his fine, white mansion, and us down here in a shack not fitting to house the fleas upon his dogs!

GITLOW. Nothing but fleas!

PURLIE. --Could wax hisself fat on the fat of the land; steaks, rice, chicken, roastineers, sweet potato pies, and hot buttered biscuits and cane syrup anytime he felt like it and never hit a lick at a snake! And us got to everyday git-up-and-git-with-it, sun up-to-sundown, on fat-back and cornmeal hoecakes--and don't wind up owning enough ground to get buried standing up in!

MISSY. Do lord!

PURLIE. --And horses and cadillacs, bull whips and bourbon, and two for' leven dollar seegars--and our fine young men to serve at his table; and our fine young women to serve in his bed![1]

Briefly in the play Purlie is shown rejecting mediocrity, apathy, cowardice, and lack of perseverance. Here he sums these patterns up, "freedom Missy, not fritters, the crying need of this Negro day and age is not grits, but greatness; not cornbread but courage; not fat-back, but fightback."[2]

Purlie also displays another characteristic of the black hero archetype. He welcomes his destiny and is willing to make sacrifices for his cause. He is willing to take a stand against the unjust treatment of blacks. Purlie's objective is to purchase "Big Bethel"--an institution he needs in order to "tell freedom," and "call upon his people--and talk to his people,"[3] for "freedom is what Big Bethel means."[4] Purlie's

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[1]Ibid., Act. III, sc. 1, p. 313.

[2]Ibid., Act. II, sc. 2, p. 305.

[3]Ibid., Act. I, sc. 1, p. 280.

[4]Ibid., p. 281.

commitment is expressed when he states, "my intention is to buy Big Bethel back; to reclaim the ancient pulpit of Grandpaw Kincaid, and preach freedom in the cotton patch."[1] Purlie is committed to tolling "that big, fat, black and sassy liberty bell, and in his pursuit of this objective he is shown willing to make the necessary sacrifice, "Big Bethel is my Bethel: "it belongs to me and to my people; I intend to have it back if I have to pay for it in blood."[2]

In conclusion, as in the other plays, the serious conflict of Purlie is born out of amusing circumstances. However, in Purlie Victorious we have seen another use of mask. The protagonist Purlie is presented as a comic-hero caricature in overstatement and a serious hero type in understatement. Purlie at first confronts Captain Cotchipee by trickery and then by symbolic wish fulfillment in the form of a lie. But later, he grabs the Captain's bullwhip and proceeds to agenge a beating he received from him twenty years ago. Nevertheless, he proves himself more human than his oppressor by throwing the whip away. In general, Purlie's conflict symbolizes the black man's quest for total recognition and just treatment in this society, the "tolling of that big, fat, black, and sassy liberty bell."

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1 Ibid.

2 Ibid., Act. II, sc. 2, p. 305.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

In this study we have examined the situational aspects of four comedies: St. Louis Woman, by Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen; Simply Heavenly, by Langston Hughes; Trouble in Mind, by Alice Childress; and Purlie Victorious, by Ossie Davis. In our examination we found that the plays presented a humorous facade, yet underneath, the protagonists' conflicts were of serious dimensions. These conflicts were presented differently in each play. In our first play we found the protagonist, Lil Augie, in conflict with a misdirected value system. In our next play we found Jess P. Simple at odds with trying to live merely a simple existence. We found a black hero archetype appearing in the two latter plays. In both plays we found these types in direct confrontation with their oppressors.

The songs, tales, and plays we have discussed serve as understated complaints against black mistreatment in this society from slavery through freedom. A rabbit, symbolizing the weak, steps on a gator, symbolizing the powerful, yet reverses his situation and places the latter in "trouble." John tricks his master into the very sack the latter was to use to throw him in the river. Purlie threatens to whip Captain Cotchipee with the very whip the bigot used to whip him with 20 years earlier.

In the lyrics of the songs we have discussed as well as in the plays we find the complaint. The slaves shuck corn while the massa

counts the money, they sif de wheat, but get the huss, and get a brand new coat master discarded on the wall. In our plays Simple complains symbolically of "stormy weather," that is a part of black existence in this society where everything "happens" to a black man. Wiletta complains of the servile roles she had to play during her career. Purlie complains of the Captain living in a fine mansion while "us down here living in shacks."

There is also resistance in the form of disobeying orders. John refuses to shoot a deer after being ordered to do so by his master. In another tale he keeps steppin' on to Canada despite his master's pleas for him to come back. He even tries to steal a hog from his master, another flagrant violation of the master-slave code. Wiletta refuses to be a "damn janitor," for her director and also play the role of a mother who turns her son over to a "lynch mob." Purlie dares return to Cotchipee County after being banned from there previously.

What these plays and their predecessors, folk songs and tales, probably suggest is the continuation of a masked behavior which originated during slavery and existed during the period of the plays. Our emphasis here has been on the existence of this behavior as reflected in black written comedies. Black dramatists as artists and citizens in this society were the victims of the same unjust treatment ordained to most blacks. In their aspirations to be contributing factors in the development of American drama they were met with lack of recognition and predominant rejection. Only a small number were given recognition. Those accepted into traditional theater were expected to portray negative

images and symbols of the black race. However, determined to display their craft, black dramatists retreated to the black community. There they were allowed freedom of expression and were free to write plays about and for blacks.

The use of mask continues. The facade of many recent black written comedies is humorous, yet it conceals understatements of serious dimensions. The display of misdirected value systems within the black community; economic barriers that call for a complex existence for those who merely want to live a simple existence; confrontations between hero types and the establishment; and the quest for freedom and dignity in this society are all echoed in many of the present comedies. The worlds of "Targee Street" and "Harlem;" the quest for better life styles; the refusal to accept servility; lack of perseverance; "Uncle Tomism," and apathy; and the quest to "tell freedom" symbolically reappear in the assertions of black playwrights in the latter sixties and early seventies. Again we find the different uses of mask within the subject matter of particular plays. The two most influential uses of mask appear in the plays of Douglas Turner Ward and Ed Bullins.

Douglas Turner Ward's Day of Absence represents a use of mask in more recent black written comedies.[1] Its face presents a bizarre situation in which whites in a small Southern town wake up to find that all the blacks have disappeared. Those who cannot move--in jails, are locked in unable to be reached--those in hospitals, are in comas and unable to

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[1] See also the discussion of Happy Ending, Chapter I, pp. 1-2 of this thesis.

be revived. With the disappearance of the blacks everything in the town turns into utter chaos. The whites who have become almost solely dependent on blacks as maids, servants, janitors, mammies, laborers, and whipping boys; become totally confused and panicky. The result is the almost total destruction of the town and its civil government. The incident is presented in hilarious, whimsical, and fantastical fashion with the addition of reverse minstrelsy where black actors are presented on the stage in white face.

Underneath Ward's comical, and white face minstrel guise we find a reversal of roles similar to those in our tales and Purlie Victorious. The "master" is placed in "trouble," in "de sack," and the "Bull whip" changes hands. Day of Absence is a humorous mask of the bizarre and fantastic; yet, underneath we find understated bitterness at "the oppression and exploitation of blacks by whites in the American scheme of things."[1]

The plays of Ed Bullins offer a different use of mask. In the realist fashion displayed by Alice Childress in Trouble in Mind--"comedy-drama"--Bullins presents characters, language, and situations that we can chuckle at, but these characters are involved in a constant struggle for survival in their environments. Bullin's In the Wine Time[2] displays this use of mask. It is the story of Cliff Dawson who takes the blame

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1 Clinton Oliver and Stephanie Sills, eds., "The Negro and the American Theater," Contemporary Black Drama (New York, 1971), p. 28.

2 Ed Bullins, In the Wine Time in Black Drama, ed. by Lindsay Patterson (New York, 1971), Act. III, p. 406.

for the killing of a youth in order to protect his nephew, Ray, the actual killer. His motive for doing so was to allow Ray to fulfill his ambition to go to the Navy and be somebody worthwhile: "it's your world boy, go out there and claim it."

Cliff at times reminds us of Jess P. Simple. He seeks only to live a simple existence, he is "going to school" and "studying business." He wants to try his hand at being "a family man." However, Cliff is surrounded by a complex world devoid of a moral and economic value system positive to the upgrading of blacks in his community. He is surrounded by poverty, violence--a world of "ditty boppers," and "avenue hypes," and "drug addicts,"--a world like Targee Street and Harlem. His alternate ambition is also hindered by existence in a negatively perpetrated environment. He desires to see Ray get a better chance in the world, "beyond the lampost," and "just across the avenue." In the end he becomes a hero type sacrificing his future livelihood so that Ray can have the chance he himself missed. He becomes a sacrifical resister by refusing to allow the system to destroy another youth as it has done many in his neighborhood. This understatement is presented in the tradition of Langston Hughes, "ironic laughter mixed with tears."[1]

Bullins presents an "avenue,"--"lampost world" where the suffering of blacks are ritualized, but from an ironic distance. He presents a revolutionary message through "tragi/comic lyricism." This facade of tragi/comic lyricism is a mask in the urban folk epic tradition, like

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1 See Geneva Smitherman, "Why I Sing the Blues," Black World, XIV (April, 1974), 7.

"Shine" and "Stag-O-Lee;" verbal games, like "the dozens:" and "laughing to keep from crying" lifestyles?[1]

To add, in a media orientated society we find the use of mask. Black writers for television and films are forced to present codified messages with their creations. The television Good Times offers a good example. Despite the hilarious verbal bouts and anecdotal situations, a family struggles through the misfortunes, hardships, and dangers that are usually the result of life in a ghetto environment. In Good Times there is "pain behind laughter," in the symbolizing of "struggle against oppression, which is so deeply human and so indigenous to black art."[2]

The movie Cotton Comes to Harlem serves as an example of a recent film that displays the use of mask. It carries a comical face, but within it a serious struggle exists which is symbolized by the events surrounding a bale of cotton. Crime, drugs, extortion, greed, and corruption are all related to a white bale of cotton supposedly filled with money. The bale, an anachronism of the South, symbolizes the migration of blacks from the South. Its displacement in Harlem symbolizes the displacement of blacks in what was to be ironically their promised land. Cotton, a product that built the South destroyed the values, customs, mores, heritage, and identity of blacks. The erosion of black African originated culture followed the migrants to the Northern promised land, where there

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1 Ibid.

2 Eugenia Collier, "Black Shows for White Viewers," Freedomways, XIV (Third Quarter, 1974), 212.

was a failure to establish a new positive value system. Thus, the result of black migration has been the creation of an environment laden with crime, drugs, pimps, religious con-men. The cotton, its white color, and the money inside it symbolize the material orientated value system of this society that was responsible for the deterioration of culture and identity.

Will black playwrights, television writers, and screen writers continue to mask their portrayals of black life? Will there ever be room for pure entertainment with messages that clearly reflect black identity, heritage, and positive values rather than survival tactics in an unjust society? Will positive images continue to be codified under negative images? Hoyt Fuller states:

> There seem clear signs now that Black theater in America is on the verge of a beginning. In the past few years, the more revolutionary of the theater people have led the all important struggle against the tyranny of the "traditional," which is to say the theater of Europe. That war, of course is not won; there is no certainty that it could ever be won in any simple and decisive way .... What is crucial is that black people be liberated to deal with perceptions in a manner which is natural for them, and that the validation of their manifestations be the responsibility of black people.[1]

Thus, blacks are yet forced to rely on mediums controlled by a system that has traditionally aided in the negative portrayals of blacks and suppressed their artistic contributions in this society. In this light the use of mask yet survives. It will exist as long as black writers have limited access to the mediums that can aid in the mass projection of much needed positive symbols and images to blacks. It will exist as

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[1] Hoyt Fuller, "General Theater Round-up," Black World, XX (April, 1971), 24.

long as blacks are denied equal rights in this society.

In conclusion, the four comedies we have discussed, St. Louis Woman; Trouble in Mind; Simply Heavenly; and Purlie Victorious, represent mask that carried underlying meanings. Though the plays were amusing and humorous, they portrayed protagonists in serious conflict and struggle with forces that were the cause of or result of an oppressive existence in this society. Whether trying to win a race, live a simple existence, play a positive character, or purchase Big Bethel the protagonists of our plays had to confront obstacles caused by injustice in this democratic society. Their struggles, whether against psychological or economic barriers, or against subtle or overt bigotry symbolize those of blacks in our society. Thus, our plays may be considered treatises on injustice recorded in humor.

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*The plays discussed in this study are printed in this anthology: Arna Bontemps and Countee Cullen, St. Louis Woman, pp. 1-41; Langston Hughes, Simply Heavenly, pp. 175-219; Alice Childress, Trouble in Mind, pp. 135-174; Ossie Davis, Purlie Victorious, pp. 277-332.

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